

From Babyboards to Rainbows — A Woman's Artistic Journey

Sometimes it's hard for Bernyce Courtney to find the time and space for her artwork. Being the mother of a busy two year old can be very demanding.

And yet it was her motherhood that kindled and continues to fuel Bernyce's artistic energy.

A little over two years ago the expectant mother sewed "a lot of love" into a babyboard and surprised herself by creating "the most beautiful one I ever saw."

She laughs about the board being way too big for her son Rain, but she packed him into it and now the board lives a second life standing proudly on display in their livingroom.

The babyboard was just a beginning. Since then Rain has been surrounded with his mother's creations: a pair of buckskin mittens, a copper and bone choker, a "dance shirt" (also too big) with dangling pine cone scales that rattle merrily, and many other items that Rain often considers playthings.

Home has been a source of inspiration for Bernyce but her life as an artist is growing beyond the walls of her Gresham apartment.

A student at Mt. Hood Community College for the past two semesters, Bernyce has found great satisfaction in her second attempt at school.

At a more mature 26 years, she has chosen a line of study that is also a way of life, and the art major is receiving recognition for her evolving artwork that surprises her more than anyone.

At her first showing - a year-end invitational display of students' work at the college gallery during May - Bernyce was awarded a blue ribbon for her entry in fabrics.

Swinging in the quiet gallery, Bernyce's soft batik purse revealed first a sun face, then a moon face - designs suggesting Northwest Coastal masks. Sparkling "stars" were sewn to the inside of the purse which, even with its long fragile fringe, was made to be used.

The artist, who grew up in Warm Springs, feels that the cultural influence on this particular work made it unique and therefore a prize winner at the show.

But the other pieces in the exhibit show a versatility in Bernyce's efforts. Two sensitive charcoal renderings of nudes, a quick gesture drawing and a pair of fur-lined buckskin mittens rounded out the display of her talents.

Bernyce has worked vigorously this year in ceramics ("I loved it but couldn't get anywhere"), silkscreen (she has a stockpile of T-shirts at home), drawing ("I knew I could draw

but I didn't know how far I could go with it"), jewelry and fabrics.

"I like to combine different media," commented Bernyce and she feels she has done this most successfully with fabrics. "Fabric won't get boring - there's always something new to do."

Her kitchen is covered with wax and dye from batik-ing cloth and, like a pack rat, she has hoarded items that one day might combine to make highly decorative and original clothing. Vests, shirts, purses and other apparel festoon her closets as well as her friends' and relatives'.

Though sometimes she feels that her dabbling in different media might be preventing real growth in one area, Bernyce has been excited to see patterns emerge and style evolve in her work.

She was not aware of the masks until a fellow student drew attention to the theme that she has unwittingly woven into her work. Faces reminiscent of the wooden masks of the Northwest Coast were showing up in her jewelry, wall hangings, pottery and clothing. She finds it interesting that she has discovered a symbol that has given her work an Indian flavor as well as personal character.

Bernyce was given an opportunity this month to show her work a second time and also talk about her brief but growing life as an artist. In a program the theme of which was the Old West, Bernyce showed a Portland women's Christian group on June 16 that her art, far from belonging at the Old West of the last century, is truly contemporary in concept and design.

The young artist feels that her ideas are different enough from the college's that she would like to spend the next year looking into the work of other Indian artists. Bernyce is applying to the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe.

Although there is no particular artist whose work inspires Bernyce, she admires the handiwork evident at powwows, remarking that the Indian beaders and seamstresses are artists in their own right, though most don't know it.

Bernyce's own family is unusually artistic. Her brother draws, another sews, her mother beadworks and her sister is a proficient craftsman who has a well of ideas and support for Bernyce.

Bernyce expects that her artistic journeys will bring her back to her reservation home where she hopes to be a "stimulus" to local craftsmen and artists.

Her dream is to open an arts and crafts shop in Warm Springs once she acquires the business know-how. She is tired of "people exploiting their own people" and would like to promote the work of locals to their best financial and artistic advantage.

In the meantime Bernyce would like to begin living off



Bernyce Courtney and her son Rain share a moment in their Gresham apartment, surrounded by Bernyce's recent artwork. A batik mask seems to watch as Rain plays with his favorite of mom's creations - a pair of fur-lined buckskin gloves decorated with "one bear, one dog."

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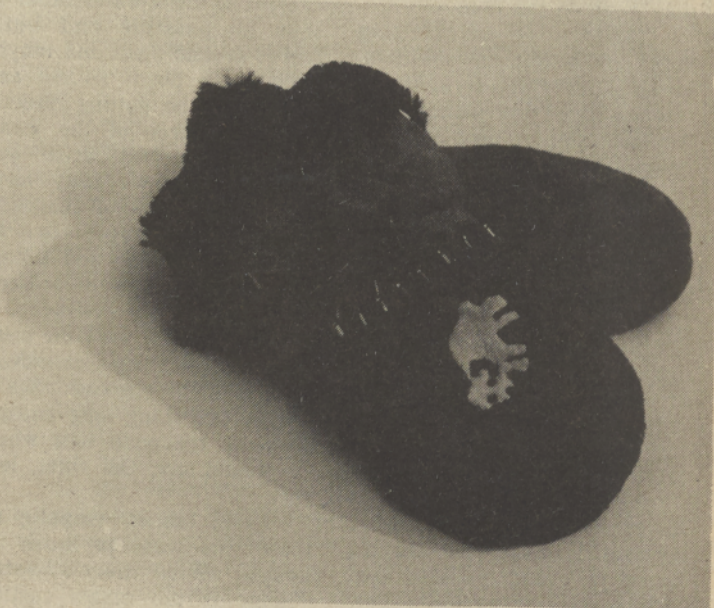
the products of her creative energy and has already found a market for baby and doll boards. She admits that selling her own work is difficult and she would prefer to give it to relatives and friends.

Bernyce is still basking in the glow of having found a "way of life, not a hobby" that is deeply satisfying. "I'm not trying to prove anything to

anyone," she observes. "I feel at ease with it."

More than anything, Bernyce sees her artwork as a reflection of her growing happiness.

Rainbows are another of her artistic symbols. Rain can expect to be trailed by rainbows while his mother explores the new world of art she has discovered.



These fur-lined buckskin mittens made by Bernyce for her son Rain were displayed at an exhibit at the Mt. Hood College gallery during the month of May.

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The mask theme in Bernyce Courtney's artwork was inspired by the wooden masks of the Northwest Coastal culture. This purse depicts the sun and moon and it won Bernyce a first prize in a recent showing at Mt. Hood Community College.

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